

Three Corpse Brunch: Part One

by Mary Diamond

Three women sat at a table in a fancy restaurant, napkins folded neatly into their designer-skirt covered laps. The room was empty except for them and the empty chair awaiting the mysterious host who had invited them all to a late lunch in the city. He was unknown to any of them, all three responded to a paper invitation that had been mailed two weeks ago. They were freelancers, all of them eking out a living by the written word, but barely getting by on what they could find to get paid for. The calligraphy on the card looked to have been inked by hand, and it invited each woman to an interview for a writing project. A private citizen was looking to pen an autobiography and wanted a ghost writer to help for a substantial amount of pay. Discretion was cited as being of the utmost importance, as this private citizen had no wish for anyone to be aware of the project until it's completion. The address was an upscale restaurant in downtown Chicago, and included an RSVP card.

The envelope had nearly been thrown out when it arrived at the first location; our domestic writer had no patience for more scams inviting her to make more money from the comfort of her home. She had been let go from her last job as a receptionist and her husband's sales career kept them just barely afloat without her steady part-time income. Writing had always been what she wanted to do -her bachelor's in English simmered on a back burner while she wiped baby bottoms and scrubbed dried breakfast cereal from the bowls stacked in her kitchen sink. Her sporadic blogging hadn't made any profit from the website she'd linked it to, promising to pay her for click-throughs from her blog to the advertisers. Hours of trolling through work-from-home websites and online-employment forums

had earned her nothing but another day's work cleaning ad-ware from her PC. The paper invitation promised at the least a free lunch at her favorite restaurant. It didn't hurt that she'd be driving into the city for it, and the whole time she'd be free of kids and demands and domestic duties. She had been ten minutes early, and ordered a drink to pass the time. When the other women arrived, she instantly felt shabby and prepared herself to adapt to anything.

The second woman seated at the table was less domestic, but not without her womanly charm. Her blonde hair was styled in an "up do" and pinned neatly in every place. She was younger than the first, in her early 20's, and she had breezed through college only to find herself swimming in an ocean of competitors for the few jobs someone her age would be willing to accept right after graduation. Her friends had warned her this would probably turn out to be some sort of pervert's way of filtering attractive women from the herd so they could be harassed prior to employment -which would certainly be based on their appearance and willingness at the initial interview. She smiled to herself privately, looking at her two companions, for she knew that in a contest for chauvinist attention, she'd certainly be the favorite.

Brunch guest number three was not entirely confident in her current situation. The invitation had not actually been sent to her... but to her employer, a finicky author of romantic novels who was constantly teetering on the brink of becoming known. This guest was actually a cleaning lady -had been cleaning this author's home for years, and had always considered herself to be the better writer. Unfortunately, she hadn't chosen a genre like "historical romance" to exercise her trade and had never been published, not even once. Her employer had received the invitation and tossed it into the trash without hesitation. One woman's trash became this one's free lunch. She had every intention of impressing this mysterious benefactor with her skills and eventually taking the job meant for her employer. It would be her one chance, the chance she couldn't get scrubbing

floors for a haughty old pervert-ess with a knack for rewording the descriptions of historical people's genitals. She also smiled to herself, because she could already begin to recognize that this was an opportunity that she alone would be taking advantage of.

As their host began his shambling approach, all three women's heads turned to observe him. From the moment they had decided to come until the present, each seated guest had been parading one faceless male possibility after another through her curious mind. Would he be strong? Handsome? Ugly? Crippled? The possibilities were endless... he could be a celebrity -some face that each of them had seen so often on television that she'd feel a sense of instant familiarity. The man who approached ripped through their expectations of imagined gentlemen, tearing them apart completely with each thump of his silver tipped walking cane. The shaft was black as midnight, shined like glass and clutched in a spotted old claw of a hand. His suit was impeccable, pinstriped like only an old rich man's suit can be, and looked as if it was hanging from a moving skeleton. His body was humped, like a streetlamp, over the cane which thumped across the wooden floor and preceded the dusty shuffle of his feet behind it.

He appeared to be affecting a smile toward the ladies' table, and as his lips slowly pulled back away from his teeth he took on such a skeletal appearance that one or two of the women stifled gasps. In the awkward panic that followed, all three of them clumsily rose to greet the ancient purveyor of lunch with smiles, introductions, and nervously folded hands. His greeting was softly spoken but as he nodded them toward their seats and turned toward his own, he continued addressing them in an assertive tone. He welcomed them to the establishment (which as it turned out was a recent acquisition he was quite proud of) and thanked them for taking an interest in his proposition. This book was to be something of a life's work for him, a record of his time on the Earth and a memoir for his grandchildren to remember him by.

The conversation was related mostly to writing projects each woman had undertaken in the last few years, and as they spoke in turn they all three wondered if the other was as nervous about the unsettling appearance of their interviewer. The cleaning lady, who had been doing as much writing as she could while tending to the needs of the woman whose invitation she had stolen, was struggling to keep up. She could speak of projects she'd worked on... but there was no publication to tout or name she could drop to lend credibility to the reference. She remembered some papers she'd written while she was still in school and spoke of her brief stint as a writing tutor... at the school she was no longer attending.

The young blonde had joined a number of extracurricular organizations that created pro-bono student run businesses doing the sort of work they'd eventually get paid for. It gave her experience in the real world, and allowed her to put her skills and knowledge to the test. She tugged at the hem of her skirt subconsciously, each time the old man's gaze would swing her way. As if the tiny movement could cover her overtanned legs, which were under the table any way, and keep her skin from crawling as he watched her. He'd smile stiffly and turn to the next speaker each time, his sunken cheeks catching shadows from the small candle on the table top as he moved.

The housewife, for as much as she longed for it she'd never been referred to as a writer, was feeling more confident than these others. She had been alive long enough to witness old age up close. Her grandparents and parents had withered before her eyes and passed away and this old corpse was not intimidating enough to turn her around. He was far older looking and seemingly frail than anyone she'd seen outside a coffin, but he was just an old man physically ravaged by time and miraculously intact within. As he spoke to and asked his pointed questions of each woman, receiving each reply with a brief movement of the head and a guttural sound

from the throat, she could see the cogs of his intelligence turning, endlessly. He seemed to be a very sharp old geezer, and was using the assumptions of the other two women to set them at ease as he inspected their responses. His eyes turned to watch the housewife, who was inspecting him as only a wary mother can, and he seemed to chuckle somewhat.

She wondered briefly if he was reading her mind, and after an imperceptible nod he spoke to her directly. His voice had become raspy and taken on a deep crackle as he had been sitting at the table. Even as the women savored bites of rich, sauced up pasta in between anecdotes he had been motionless behind his plate of untouched lobster. His hand never left the polished cane, gleaming in the drapery-induced dimness and flickering candle light. Suddenly the three women began to realize that evening had nearly fallen entirely. The light coming in through the thick velvet draperies was tinged with a bloody orange and the table had gone from a white field of linen to a cluttered landscape of candle-lit porcelain and silver.

The housewife felt a sudden lump of guilt in her stomach as she realized the children would be put to bed soon and she wouldn't be reading their stories. Her guilt was pushed away by panic as she suddenly struggled to remember when she was expected to return. Relief; she had given herself the entire night to be away, hoping that after the luncheon she'd be able to walk the city streets for just a few hours, looking into the shops where city people bought things every day that were beyond her budget or lifestyle. Her attention returned suddenly to the thinly stretched skin and the teeth that were just a little too long to resemble a human old man. The night seemed to be rushing in to the room as he muttered something unintelligible and reached out for her hand. Flushing hotly, in the realization that his touch would cause her to shudder, she offered it to him and wondered briefly at her inability to remember anything he (or anyone else for that matter) had been saying for the last hour.

He took her warm flesh in his claws and lifted it toward his mouth as if to place a gentile kiss upon the back of it. His hands were like paper gloves, dry and without warmth or coolness, and as soon as she felt them she was alarmed at both the temperature and the strength of his grasp.

With a firm, quick movement he twisted her wrist around too far and shattered it. Before she could even open her mouth to scream he had Stabbed the tip of his cane through the left eye of the blonde across from him and moved in a supernatural fraction of an instant behind the imposter to ravage her throat with his bared skeleton teeth. Her life's blood pumped out of the wound he was gnawing at in lilliputian spurts, the stain slowly spreading across the cheap cotton weave of her buttoned-up blouse. Her eyes were like saucers, staring in exposed horror across the table at the woman who struggled with the mind-shattering pain of her decimated metacarpals. She had tumbled the chair out from under her as she reacted to the injury and the terrible seconds it took him to kill her peers. The skeleton teeth were now buried in dark jelly-like tissues, stained with the crimson horror that spilled out of the first bite he'd taken that night. Her head fell away from his mouth and led her body's ragged collapse onto the wooden flooring as he dropped her.

"Liar..." rasped the gravelly voice that escaped his now frighteningly toothy visage. His flesh no longer had the elasticity to compose a grin but somehow the suggestion of glee was carried out in his lifeless features. He stepped with a dexterity that told her either he had pretended from the beginning to be old and feeble or his recent feast had lent him newfound strength. He reached for the perfectly arranged hair of the young girl between them and wrapped it in his bony digits, lifting her sagging one-eyed head and pulling, with little effort, her body from the chair it had slumped into. His eyes never left the terrified woman who stood just a few feet away, cradling her arm and screaming silently into the oblivion that had taken over her mind. He paused for a strange tick, twitching

unnaturally and plunging his teeth into the soft artery beneath the tanned, young skin of his next course. The wet gnawing was like nothing the housewife had ever heard in all her days of cleaning up disgusting things. She struggled to find a thought beyond nameless panic and settled upon the images of her children to keep her from losing consciousness.

Pulling away violently from the young woman's gaping throat, the old wretch threw her body toward the ground as if it had bitten him back. His grimace had become a scowl, and he wiped at his hollow cheek with the liver-spotted back of his hand. He straightened his back slowly, stretching luxuriously as if his muscles hadn't been allowed to extend in a century. He seemed to be settling himself, still staring at the woman transfixed before him, and without moving. She stared back without seeing him, but seeming to look right into his gaze. Her mind had gone perfectly still in the seconds he had been feeding and as much as the pain in her arm made her want to scream, it had also helped her overcome the urge to run screaming from the scene. She felt, suddenly, as if a veil had been lifted from her mind in that second of pain and panic and horror. His unnatural hold on her had faltered in that moment and her consciousness had escaped his powerful grasp. He began to speak again, his eyes beginning to shine with a light from within, like an unidentified animal on a pitch-dark forest trail.

"This one has had no life. She lacks the spice of experience..." the tenor of his voice was like a heavy object being drug through dead wet leaves. He appeared to be savoring her fear of him, pulling at it like an invisible thread that was slowly unraveling her sanity as it left her. "Sinners, like the first, are so much more flavorful... I wonder which you will be?"

His dry chuckle had evolved into a throaty staccato laughter now, as he lifted one foot and moved it forward, the walking cane abandoned beside his chair, still gleaming through the crimson gore

from the blonde's eye socket. He began to lift his hand toward her weakly, as if he would require little effort to capture her with it. His previous actions had betrayed a super human strength and speed, but her attacker had mistaken her reservation for paralyzation and was in no hurry now. Time felt as if it had thickened and slowed. As her eyes dropped to follow his approach, she noticed the table linen had been yanked toward her when she had recoiled from his wrist-shattering grasp. The leaded crystal goblet that held a gel-fueled tin of decorative flame was now precariously close to the round edge of the table. It flickered playfully, reminding her in one brief comical instant of her short stint selling candles to other housewives in their living rooms. She felt a sudden rush of intense rabid fury. All her life she had been trying to find a way through the constant battle of failures, each dream of motivation or success met with a more ridiculous end than the other. This was just too much. To be devoured by some sort of undead monster with a spambot for luring in unemployed freelancers -it was just too fucking much.

In one sweeping motion, stoic in the knowledge that this was going to hurt, she released her broken wrist from the cradle of her good arm and swung it violently toward the tiny open flame. The sudden pain of impact shot up her arm as she felt the weight of him crashing into her chest. His teeth were strangely cool as they grazed the still soft skin over her jugular but did not sink in. As she fell backward toward the floor, his frame was silhouetted by the flames that had splashed across the back of his Armani jacket. He was faster than she could imagine, but the fuel tin had bounced up out of the holder and over his shoulder as he rushed her, the flames and their gel medium spilling like liquid destruction across the cursed creature. He had not consumed enough of the blood or the life to fight the effects of this age-old destroyer of evil. He clawed at himself as if fighting a living creature on his back, and the flames themselves seemed to be reveling in the supernatural dryness of him. He burned and careened around the room like a flaming

mummy, emitting a thin inhuman screech as he crashed into tables perfectly set with empty plates and folded napkins.

The room began to spin as the housewife banged her head against the hardwood beneath their table. She saw the macabre dance taking place and felt a brief sense of overzealous joy at the flickering light that brightened the rich interior. For the first time she noticed the dull sparkle of the crystals dripping from the ancient chandeliers. The fine layer of dust on the tables surrounding hers became noticeable and an awareness began to return to her. Suddenly she realized that for the last two weeks she had been under a spell. This was not her favorite restaurant... she'd never even heard of it. She tried to climb to her feet, one arm useless and her brain pounding against the inside of her skull like thunder. The screaming whirling corpse that painted the room with fire was shambling away toward a distant corner as she finally found her feet and forced herself to move toward the emergency exit. She was vaguely aware of movement from the door she had assumed was the kitchen, but took no heed in her haste. The fire alarm sounded just a second after she shouldered through the trigger mechanism and out the door into a dimly lit stairwell. Peeling painted cinder blocks and cold metal railings never looked so inviting.

Moments later she found herself pushing open a set of steel doors that led into the alley behind the building. The night air was chill and a steady rain shocked her into a reality she could no longer recognize. She filled her lungs with the cold air and rejoiced at her own survival. Even the lingering aroma of wet garbage and the shadowy corners of this alien landscape brought her a feeling of relief. A mugger would at least cement her belief in the world she had left behind this afternoon. She staggered now, remembering with a sudden gut-wrenching terror that she had abandoned her purse in the dining room of the old brick warehouse she was now huddling beneath. Craning her neck back, she saw the ginger flickering of the flaming linens on the third floor. There were no

sirens in the distance -not yet. Leaning against the damp roughly-hewn brick wall she paused to watch the mouth of the alley. She pushed off and approached the pool of streetlamp light on the road ahead. Reaching the next dumpster became her goal, and then the gutter protruding from the wall... finally the sidewalk was beneath the toes of her conservative black mary-janes.

Here she pulled out her phone, unsure what medium to use or who to contact. She began thumbing her husband's name into her texting app and realized suddenly that she couldn't explain what had happened in text... he would be left feeling helpless to protect her and most likely wouldn't believe it anyway. Maybe she should just come up with a good story and go to the hospital. She cleared out the address bar and tucked the phone back into her pocket. It was early fall and the chill of the wet night was beginning to seep into her completely. She stepped toward the curb to look down the street just as a sleek black stretch limousine glided silently up to the curb. The window that stopped directly in front of her slid down and a pleasant looking older gentleman, directly the opposite of what had appeared to her in the horrors of the last several hours, appeared within...

